

The Fourteenth State

Two quirky views of 18th-century Vermont

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Wouldn't it be rewarding to have a detailed description of Vermont in the late 18th century, a town-by-town itinerary that gives a sense of what life was really like back then?

There are two such descriptions, but each comes with a catch. Best known is the work of one of the state's first lawyers, John A. Graham, who was born in Connecticut and had the rare experience of having sailed to England in the 1790s. Graham visited many Vermont towns, listed the prominent citizens and commented on matters ranging from architecture to agriculture. The catch is that he was motivated to be exceedingly optimistic, even euphoric, about everything and everyone he saw.

In Vermont he had plunged into politics, church affairs, and business. He served as aide-de-camp to Governor Chittenden and once persuaded the legislature to give him a monopoly on smelting all gold, silver, copper, and lead ore in Vermont – a benefit he never used.

Graham's chief motivation was to offer an inflated opinion of Vermont to persuade wealthy Englishmen to invest in the state's "interprizes," as he spelled it. Of Bennington he wrote, "The houses are magnificent and elegant . . . The soil is excellent and raises vast supplies of wheat, Indian corn, red and white clover, and herd's grass." Pownal is "beautifully diversified with hill and dale, yet it yields great crops of wheat, corn, rye, oats, pease, and beans." On the other hand he was dubious about the residents, whom he found "rather bigoted, excessively particular, and absolutely wedded to their own forms and ways."

But back to the positive: Shaftsbury was "a rich and flourishing town," Sunderland had "prodigious" crops, Dorset's meadows had "excessive crops of hay and good pasture," and Manchester's large stream yielded "vast quantities of salmon trout (sic), and almost every kind of small fish."

The late Noel Perrin, a Dartmouth professor, took an interest in Graham and wrote a biographical essay that analyzes a half dozen motivations on Graham's part. In the Dartmouth College library Perrin found a specially annotated copy of Graham's book that obviously had been written by Graham's bitter first wife, whom he had abandoned in 1795. Perrin wrote about it in *Vermont History* in 1975 with an article titled "So

Good Bye, You Jackall: An Annotated copy of John Andrew Graham's Descriptive Sketch of the Present State of Vermont (1797)."

For something completely different, consider "A Narrative of a Tour Through the State of Vermont from April 27 to June 12, 1789" by the Rev. Nathan Perkins of Hartford, Conn. The "catch" with his work is that he was moralistically negative and cynical about almost everything and everybody. He found Governor Chittenden a "low, vulgar man, clownish, excessively parsimonious."

Perkins found the road between Williamstown and Bennington "exceedingly unpleasant" and people in Bennington were "proud, scornful, conceited & somewhat polished." In Sunderland Col. Timothy Brownson treated him with hospitality and his family was "kind, but destitute of all taste & polish." Manchester was "a loose town," Dorset's Rev. Mr. Sill was "extremely poor – poor looking family – poor land . . ."

Rev. Perkins was especially displeased by Pownal, where he found "poor land – very unpleasant – very uneven – miserable set of inhabitants – no religion, Rhode Island haters of religion . . ."

These two visitors leave us with a lesson that you must be skeptical about what you read.